Jan. 6 'blood flag' and a Bond villain in the U.S. Senate

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Body

SAY WHAT you will about our modern obsession with James Bond movies, but their timing often seems impeccable. This fall's release of No Time to Die, the 25th official film in the series, is the perfect moment to ponder the weirdness that is the Bond villain - tucked away in an impenetrable lair on a tropical island or an inaccessible Arctic mountain range, protected by (politically incorrect, often) goons and tinkering with a Doomsday Machine to destroy Planet Earth, usually for the most inscrutable of reasons.

If only the banality of evil in the real world was as interesting as the Hollywood brand. In 2021, the monster who is actually threatening Planet Earth with untimely demise is a Bond villain barely worthy of the title. His potential for amountaintop lair in his home state of West Virginia has been flattened and stripped by acentury of Big Coal, so his evil abode is instead a houseboat floating lazily in the Potomac River. His goon squad consists of oil company lobbyists and "Morning Joe" sycophants, and his only scar comes from repairing asink aboard the "Almost Heaven."

And yet make no mistake: West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin has positioned himself to destroy the globe in a way that Auric Goldfinger, Ernst Starvo Blofeld, or Lyutsifer Safin could have only dreamed of. This Friday night's news dump that Manchin will exercise his veto power as the most conservative Democrat in the 50-50 Senate to kill the lynchpin of President Biden's climate change agenda - $150 billion to help utilities transition into clean energy and away from dirty fossil fuels including coal, from which Manchin and his family have earned millions -is a gut punch to the world's environment. Manchin's move means that the United States will limp into the looming Scotland climate summit without acredible plan to reduce greenhouse gases before global temperatures pass the tipping point.

This disappointment is that the West Virginian's obstruction felt like another downward leap in an American autumn of unrelenting disappointment turning into existential despair - just an extreme example of a U.S. political system that is so badly broken and incapable of doing the right thing that frustrated voters are no longer sure who to blame, or, more importantly, what to do.

As many of us feared even as we celebrated The Former Guy's solid defeat in November 2020, the GOP - its delusional, conspiracy-fed base and the craven pols who follow their lead - hasn't so much abandoned the personality cult of Trump but embraced it as a Lost Cause, and the cornerstone of a new American fascism built around a Big Lie.

The worst moment came last week at a GOP rally in Virginia where the crowd cheered and swore allegiance to aflag they were told was carried into the "peaceful protest" (you know, the one where five people died) on Jan. 6. There's actually no way of knowing if the flag was truly carried at the Capitol Hill insurrection or whether this is just another level of Trumpified lying, but the symbolism is terrifying to any student of fascist political movements.

If you're as concerned about the fate of U.S. democracy as I am, there are some things you can do instead of going back to brunch.

Vote in November like it's a presidential year. The puppet masters of conservative politics - like the Pennsylvania hedge-fund guru Paul Martino, spending $500,000 or more on a right-wing takeover of school boards in my home state - are betting heavily on Democratic apathy to plant the seeds for agrassroots takeover of the body politic. Don't let them win.

Did you protest in 2017-20? Get back out there! Democratic voters should have learned their lesson in the Barack Obama years -voting is only one step toward saving democracy. More people should be out marching again, to let both parties know that people want voting rights, a healthy planet, and economic fairness.

Treat Manchin's corruption the way you want Republicans to treat Trump's corruption. Too many Democrats are too terrified to criticize Manchin because of fear his seat might fall to a Republican. That's baloney - the long-term rewards of being ethical, and letting the chips in West Virginia fall where they may, are far greater.

Look, I understand why so many voters were praying for a return to normalcy when Biden took the oath of office in January. But that was an unrealistic hope, and it's taken just nine months to see why. If you want anormal, healthy democracy -the one where you can enjoy a loaded omelette without thinking about politics - you're going to have to fight for it. For the American Experiment and for an endangered planet, this is no time to die.

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